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ABSTRACT

Visual criticism is a major component of the new visual communication. Visual communication has changed through the advent of new technology which allows images to be combined and manipulated with relative ease. Visual criticism analyzes the forms and practices of image production and examines the roles of images in society creating a new dialogue concerning image ethics. Through a study of the works of Paul Grice and Jurgen Habermas, the relevance of pragmatic universalists to media ethics will be seen. When used in conjunction with these principles, visual criticism can set standards for visual communication in society. (JLB)

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Universal Pragmatics: A Critical Approach to Image Ethics

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Universal Pragmatics: A Critical Approach to Image Ethics

Robert L. Craig

Introduction: Visual Criticism

Visual communication has come under intense intellectual scrutiny during the last twenty years as scholars have sought to understand the role photographs, graphics and illustrations play in modern communication. The value of studying visual communication has been heightened by the development of inexpensive, easily operated, digital imaging hardware and software, which is altering the face of the visual professions.

Besides changing the way image-makers work, the new technology puts the power to combine and manipulate images into the hands of those who heretofore lacked the finances or the handicraft skills needed to accomplish these tasks with such seeming naturalism.

Reaction to the new technology varies. In newsrooms, where the credibility of the photographic image underscores the objectivity of news, some argue that such technology has a limited role, if any at all.

Advertising photographers, of course, welcome new technical advances because they extend the photographer's ability to create the pretty, persuasive and heavily-connotated pictures advertisers demand. What all this points to, of course, is that *a* photograph is not just a photograph.

Different genres of photography have different visual, aesthetic, and narrative forms that distinguish, say, news photography from fine arts or advertising photography. If we need further evidence of the differences in photographic genres, a very good piece is that they have different codes of ethics: The kind of photographic manipulation that helps win an award for an advertising photographer gets a news photographer fired.[1]

One journalistic reaction to the new imaging technology has been to extend existing codes of ethics, which address set ups and alterations, to digital technology. Tony Kelly notes that the *San Francisco Examiner* takes the position that it does "not permit anything to be done to a photo electronically that could not be done in a traditional darkroom."[2]

In discussing journalists' reactions to digital alteration at a Poynter

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Institute conference on photojournalism ethics, Kelly notes that some journalists felt that even darkroom techniques are being overused and that allowing such manipulations was "letting the camel get his nose under the tent," and making it difficult to determine where to draw the line.

According to Kelly, the overriding concern among journalists was the fear that the credibility of journalism might be eroded by digital imagemaking. The protocol these journalists came up with to deal with the ethics of photo manipulation reflected this concern:

> *Manipulation of (documentary and news) photographs, which alters the content or context is unacceptable. Electronic or manual methods should be used only to assure the highest reproduction quality of the photograph. Photo illustrations are conceptual images and should be (easily) distinguishable from documentary photography.*[3]

The term *photo-illustration* was coined to cue readers to the fact that a photograph had been heavily constructed, set up, doctored or altered, that is, that it is a montage.

A more academic reaction is to point out the ideological limits of this debate by challenging its parameters– *to manipulate or not to manipulate.* These parameters are incorrectly premised on the false (and hidden) assumption that there is some purely mimetic or realistic core to images whereby they directly transcribe or reflect reality.

Every photograph is constructed, manipulated, doctored, edited, etc. through selecting cameras, lenses, film, exposures and lighting; framing the subject; positioning and holding the camera; deciding upon chemistry and developing and enlarging times; burning and dodging; re-touching; editing through scaling and cropping; choosing among multiple shots; screening; layout and juxtaposition; color separations; color correction; stripping; platemaking; and printing.

From this perspective, the capacity of the new digital technology to easily manipulate images has only made more visible the constructed nature of all images.

In the case of news photography, Dona Schwartz argues that focusing on technology misses the fact that becoming a news photographer means learning to recreate a limited stock of conventional news narratives.[4]

In toto, these approaches grind to a halt when they are pitted against one another. Journalists, who believe that the truth, objectivity and credibility of the press are at stake, attempt to hold the fortress against a new technology that could undermine these values. The critics argue that the fortress is built in a flood plane.

Journalists develop *situation ethics* to help them grapple with the ethical issues that arise in everyday work. Although situation ethics fall short when situations arise for which an ethical code hasn't been written, and they don't address philosophical issues such as the ontology of photographic meaning, they do clarify something of the communication practices in which journalists believe they are engaged, such as, their commitment to truth. This value is important because even in the face of devastating critiques of universal truth, a commitment to

truth remains a principled position.

Journalistic concern over credibility cuts both ways. It is quite important for readers to believe that journalists are giving them the best information available, but it is not good for society when readers are too credulous.

The recognition that all images are constructed and have an ideological character cannot be denied. The apparent objectivity or naturalness of photographic representation hides a rhetorical form which implies and persuades us of its own credibility. Photos thereby serve the ideology of press objectivity. To the extent that photography's mimetic quality obscures the fact that all news is framed, it becomes a powerful ideological tool.

Still, are we to conclude that every photograph should be labeled a photo-illustration or a montage? And, do we extend this logic to conclude that any manipulation of any image is thereby acceptable?

While both perspectives have strengths and weaknesses, they leave us at an impasse, though *visual criticism* may break this impasse. Visual criticism is a major component of the new visual communication.

Historically, *visual communication studies* incorporated traditional approaches to photography and graphics, but it distinguished itself from them by insisting on visual criticism. Visual criticism analyzes the forms and practices of imagemaking, and it also examines the role images play in society. Work in this area may help us find a framework to account for the fact that images are constructed. It should shed light on the differences among genres of images. And it must raise the issue of media's social responsibility. As for ethics, visual criticism would be quite helpful, if it provided a way to discuss ethical situations without proscribing solutions.

The Visual as Human Communication

Visual criticism began by recognizing that vision and imagemaking are as integral and fundamental to humanity as language, thus the term *visual communication*. However, because language has held a special place in scholars' estimation, it has been the subject of more intensive inquiry than visual communication. As a result, much has been learned about language, and although much of it is specific to language, some of it has had important implications for the study of visual communication.

Since the mid-1950s, when increasing numbers of scholars shifted their attention from high culture to the study of popular culture and mass media, semiotic analysis of burgeoned. Some important semioticians are Roland Barthes, Stuart Hall, James Monaco, John Hartley, Robert Hodge, Gunther Kress, John Fiske, and Judith Williamson, all of whom used semiotic methods to analyze media images. Their works contributed greatly to visual literacy by giving us a better language for describing and analyzing visual communication: e.g., signs, symbols, icons, indices, signifier, signified, referents, codes, conventions, arbitrariness, polysemy, denotation, connotation, signification, codes, conventions, the politics of representation, etc.

This approach moved the study of mass media away from its focus on media's effects on audience behavior

to examine media texts (including photographs) and their production. Because of the importance of media in modern society and, in turn, because of the centrality of imagery in media, semiotics has pushed visual communication into the center of debates about the role media plays framing our perceptions.

Pragmatics

Pragmatics, another area of linguistic study, may also provide great insight into visual communication. Pragmatics is the study of *how* people are *able* to communicate. Rudolf Carnap distinguished pragmatics from other areas of linguistics in the following way:

> *If in an investigation explicit reference is made to the speaker, or to put it in more general terms, to the user of a language, then we assign it to the field of pragmatics....*
>
> *If we abstract from the user of the language and analyze only the expressions and their designata [referents] we are in the field of semantics. And if, finally, we abstract from the designata also and analyze only the relations between the expression we are in (logical) syntax.*[3]

Pragmatics linguists (pragmatists) study how speakers come to understand one another, often examining the specific social and cultural contexts of communication. Photojournalists' concerns with credibility, context and content fall squarely into the purview of pragmatists, who are very much concerned with how speakers' and listeners' assumptions about speech allow us to infer meaning from it.

One area of pragmatics called *universal pragmatics* focuses attention on evidence for the existence of universal or transcendental foundations of communication. According to universal pragmatists, these universals between speakers are the logical basis of language, if communication is to be efficient or if, indeed, it is to take place at all.

Paul Grice (1989) and Jurgen Habermas (1987) have made important contributions to the study of universal pragmatics. Grice studies the principles he believes we all assume when we converse. Habermas takes these observations to the societal level, arguing that conversational principles are the necessary foundation of a rational society.

Once the work of Grice and Habermas is discussed, the relevance of pragmatic universals to media ethics will more clear.

Grice's Conversational Principles

Universal pragmatists argue for the existence of normative structures or principles of communication. These structures, they say, are the basic assumptions we make about the speaker-hearer relationships when we speak. I propose that these same universal assumptions provide a basis for visual criticism. I will argue that if there is such a thing as *visual* communication, it must be based in the same set of principles that underlie spoken communication.

Paul Grice, in "Logic and Conversation," developed a series of

maxims and submaxims that he claims must undergird conversation in order for it to be rational and mutually intelligible to a speaker and listener.

The maxims are grounded in three assumptions: conversation is based on a series of related (not disconnected) remarks; that a speaker and listener have a common purpose; and that they have a shared sense of purpose about the direction their conversation is taking (thus taking into account the observation that the shared purpose of conversation often changes during its course).

For Grice, a Cooperative Principle guides conversational speech: "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged."[6]

Grice's maxims are based on the Kantian categories of Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner.

Grice lists two maxims under the category of Quantity. Both refer to the quantity of information speakers provide:

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

The category of Quality contains a supermaxim and two maxims.

Try to make your contribution one that is true.

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

The category of Relation contains a single maxim:

Be relevant.

The category of *Manner* refers to how what is said is said instead of what gets said. It contains a supermaxim and four maxims:

Be perspicuous.

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief.
4. Be orderly.[7]

For Grice, the purpose of speech is to to produce a "maximally effective exchange of of information," and his underlying premise about conversation is that it is a "variety of purposive, indeed rational behavior." He observes that the Cooperative Principle and the speech maxims form the basis of the way people learn (as children) to behave when they communicate. He believes that it is reasonable to make such assumptions about communication, and that we should not abandon the Cooperative Principle or the maxims.

Grice says his maxims should be expanded to explain other purposes of speech such as persuasion or directing the actions of others, and proposes that

anyone who cares about the goals that are central to conversation/communication (such as giving and receiving information, influencing and being influenced by others) must be expected to have an interest, given suitable circumstances, in participation in talk exchanges that will be profitable only on the

assumption that they are conducted in general accordance with the Cooperative Principle and the maxims. [8]

Journalists are among those most concerned about the credibility of communication. Thus, Grice's ethical principles would seem to provide a potentially interesting framework for the ethical analysis of journalism.

Grice places great emphasis on the theory that as speakers and listeners we assume communicative principles are operating when we talk. In the give and take of conversation, we understand the context of our conversation; we assume a constantly reversing speaker-listener relationship that is based on the premises that the speaker is being truthful, informative, relevant and clear; and we infer meaning based on this knowledge by judging its validity on the basis of our own knowledge and experience. All of these assumptions, it seems to me are a powerful foundation for a healthy relationship between journalism and readers.

Jurgen Habermas: Speech and Validity Claims

The German philosopher Jurgen Habermas takes Grice's principles of communication further by arguing that without universal pragmatic assumptions, human communication and society would be impossible. His pragmatic theory is one component of a larger critical theory of society.

For Habermas, the basis of non-coercive society and culture is communicative consensus among its members. That is, in order to achieve consensus, mutual understanding must be achieved through argumentation among people about claims, propositions and assertions that others make.

Habermas believes a set of norms he calls *truth or validity claims* are the foundation of mutual understanding. In becoming a speaker, every individual learns to make propositions, and every proposition carries with it a truth claim. Thus, when competent speakers utter propositions, they imply that they are based in truth. The merits of truth-claims may be debated by the speaker and listener. For Habermas, the ultimate purpose of debating the truth claims underlying propositions is to allow speakers to build a rational and just society.

Habermas (1987) isolates three forms that propositions take and discusses the truth claims they entail:

As the medium for achieving understanding, speech acts serve: a) to establish and renew interpersonal relations, whereby the speaker takes up a relation to something in the world of legitimate (social) orders; (b) to represent (or presuppose) states and events, whereby the speaker takes up a relation to something in the world of existing states of affairs; (c) to manifest experiences–that is, to represent oneself–whereby the speaker takes up a relation to something in the subjective world to which he has privileged access. Communicatively achieved agreement is measured against exactly three criticizable validity claims; in coming to an understanding about something

with one another and thus making themselves understandable, actors cannot avoid embedding their speech acts in precisely three world-relations and claiming validity for them under these aspects. Someone who rejects a comprehensible speech act is taking issue with at least one of these validity claims. In rejecting a speech act as (normatively) wrong or untrue or insincere, he is expressing with his "no" the fact that the utterance has not fulfilled its function of securing an interpersonal relationship, of representing states of affairs, or of manifesting experiences. It is not in agreement with the world of existing states of affairs, or with the speaker's own world of subjective experiences. [9]

For Habermas then, communicative action is not possible without assuming validity claims are implied in propositions and that listeners are able to challenge propositions as wrong, untrue or insincere based on reasoning, moral standards or aesthetic judgment.

Propositions that directly contradict Grice's principles of speech or Habermas' validity claims–such as "I am a liar," "I am lying to you," "What I am saying to you is irrelevant," or "I am insincere"–create logical conundrums because they throw the whole logic of communication into question. Lying deceives us because we we are predisposed to believe that people tell us the truth.

Communication cannot be based on an illogic of untruthfulness, irrelevance or insincerity. Truth, relevance and sincerity appear to be the default modes of human communication.

Journalism as Propositional

The parallels between the values Habermas sees operating in public communication are too close to those claimed for socially responsible journalism to be ignored. Like Grice's principles, Habermas' are concerned with speech and thus he believes his validity claims apply to an *ideal speech situation*. Although journalism is not speech, its claims to be truthful and valid (credibility) open it up to analysis as a *form* of public speech. Indeed, asking journalism to conform to the assumptions and conditions of speech may be quite helpful to both journalists and the public.

First, if one considers journalistic content not to be truth itself but propositions about events that journalists *claim* are truthful, sincere and relevant, then we have established a more accurate definition of what journalists do from a communication stand point.

That is, journalists present *propositions* about events and subjects, and these propositions carry truth and validity claims. Essentially journalists claim that their propositions are the most truthful, relevant and sincere propositions they can make about a subject at a given time.

Second, such a *propositional* definition situates serious journalism on terrain far closer to what the First Amendment protects: the public expression of propositions important to society.

Third, by recognizing journalism as propositional, the public is encouraged to engage in a discourse with journalists by questioning the validity of their claims and by communicating counter-propositions.

Fourth, the fact that journalism becomes a sounding board for public policymaking enhances its status.

Communication and Society

Before we apply these pragmatic principles to the criticism of photojournalism, another aspect of Habermas' thinking should be mentioned, and that is the centrality of communication in Habermas' critical theory of modern society.

In his theory, Habermas argues that public discourse is necessary to build a rational society. He believes that in moving from a theological forms of society to modernity humanity made a major philosophical break with metaphysical and religious conceptions of society. In the modern epoch, philosophy turns its attention to the rational construction of society, its behaviors, norms and values. He writes:

> *Modernity is characterized by a rejection of the substantive rationality typical of religious and metaphysical worldviews and by a belief in procedural rationality and its ability to give credence to our views in the three areas of objective knowledge, moral-practical insight, and aesthetic judgment.*[10]

Thus, rather than truth being bestowed on humanity from above and decisions being made on the basis of unrelenting faith in doctrine, as in theological societies, Habermas argues that the essence of modern society is that its social institutions should be rationally c constructed through public discourse.

In his *ideal speech situation*, people and groups have the opportunity to advance and challenge propositions, and they must not be hindered from participating in public discourse.[10] Habermas calls the social space for such discourse the *public sphere*. If we consider journalism to be part of the public sphere, then individuals should have a right, even a responsibility, to participate in it.

Like other members of the Frankfurt School, Habermas worries that the rational mandate of modernity is in danger of being lost. He argues that instrumental reason, rather than critical inquiry and open discussion, governs much of today's decision-making. He observes that modern bureaucracies tend to gravitate toward technical rationality, which provides inertia to support decisions that fit established paradigms of thought and behavior and favors decisions that are favorable to institutions but not necessarily individuals or society. Bureaucratic discussion is often restricted by elites to the means for implementing decisions.

In short, modernist society is in danger of being overrun by a technical one in which instrumental reason concerns itself with means and short-term goals and stifles discussion about the qualities of a good society, its long-term aims, and the methods needed to build such a society.

For Habermas then, the cornerstone of a modernist view of society is the pragmatic assumption that we are able to enter into rational discourse with one another. As Habermas notes in the opening of "Discourse Ethics," "As long as moral philosophy concerns itself with clarifying the everyday institutions into

which we are socialized, it must be able to adopt, at least virtually, the attitude of someone who participates in the communicative practice of everyday life." [11]

Habermas argues that communicative action—with the expressed purpose of achieving mutual understanding—is the telos of society.[12] A critical theory of society based in communication is a powerful one because it ties together cognitive, political, aesthetic and ethical dimensions. It also establishes as a human priority the building of a good society through rational and equal relations of principled communication.

The question before us now is whether Grice's insight that communicating is grounded in a set of universal ethical principles and whether Habermas' communicative ethics and his critical view of modern society can be applied to media ethics. As a start, we can consider the ethics of photography and photo editing.

Ethics and Photography

Photojournalism has an obvious advantage over other genres of photography, such as advertising photography, in constructing an ethic, because it espouses the ideals of truth and social responsibility. It is not difficult to see that Grice and Habermas' principles provide a guide for addressing some ethical problems that arise in journalism as communication. And Habermas' insistence on the importance of public communication in building a rational society encourages us to consider the relevance of journalism to society.

Figure 1 shows one way communicative ethics might be used to raise questions and issues about journalistic practices.

If one assumes that journalistic propositions should be challenged rather than being taken for granted, then even digital manipulation can be considered valid, like carefully choosing words and syntax in speech. If photo manipulation removes something that is irrelevant to the subject and doesn't falsify the subject, why shouldn't it be used?

It is of course important that all Grice's maxims be met in every photograph, not simply most of them. For instance, if a photograph gives a false sense of a subject, whether the photo is unambiguous is beside the point. Further, if these principles are *universal standards*, one principle cannot be violated to achieve another end, even a higher level truth. But if a photo manipulation helps a photographer frame a more truthful, relevant and sincere proposition, should it not be utilized?

When we look critically at what journalists say about the new photography, we see many traces of the bureaucratic and technical rationality that Habermas' discusses. For instance, the protocol quoted (above) by Kelly says that digitizing a photo is acceptable if the intent is to improve it *technically*. And editors' concerns about credibility seem to want the readers to have "faith" in journalism rather than actively challenging its every word.

Following Grice's ethical principles also empowers journalists over and against their editors by making it a journalist's responsibility to challenge photographic misappropriation or misrepresentation by an editor. To do

Figure 1: Applying Principles of Communication to News Practice

Grice: Is this photo as informative as required?

News Practice: Does this photo or series of photos tell the whole story, or as much as possible, or as much as is needed for the reader comprehension?

Would another photo better inform?

Would more information such as background, context, or alternative views help the reader better understand the subject?

Does a lack of information or poor framing distort the subject?

Grice: Is this photo more informative than required?

News Practice: Do I need a photo for this story?

Can the meaning of this photo be clarified by cropping?

Grice: Is your contribution true?

News Practice: Does the photo say what you believe to be false? Does it say something for which you lack adequate evidence?

Is the photo libelous?

Does it give readers a false idea about the subject?

Does the caption or cutline make the photo validate something untrue or that you do not know to be true?

Are editors misappropriating or misrepresenting your work?

What evidence would better support your claim?

Grice: Is this photo relevant?

News Practice: To the story? To the reader?

Habermas: Is this photo relevant?

News Practice: To building a better society?

What is the purpose of photojournalism and a free press?

Is journalism fulfilling its special obligation as a forum for public communication?

Grice: Is the meaning of this photo clear and Precise? Obscure? Ambiguous? Orderly?

News Practice: Has the subject been clearly framed? Do the techniques used to produce this photo improve it as communication?

so addresses an issue of bureaucratic rationality, which is seldom discussed. Why is it that among the stories told about journalistic ethics, we hear from photojournalists about how editors misappropriate their photographs, but we have no published accounts of such incidents. Has an editor ever been fired for misappropriating a photograph?

Finally, and this is just a casual observation, there seems to be a lot more fluff in photojournalism today, and I suspect it is not because photojournalists aren't interested in doing substantial work. The relevance of photojournalism to building a good society is unquestioned, but its superficial application in fluff and feature are open to question. Habermas would have us question the social relevance of every word and image that appear in the press.

Conclusion

In the old ideology of photojournalism, the camera was an instrument for accurate documentation, which defined the photograph as an artifact of the truth. From Habermas' perspective, the whole institutional setup of journalism, which privileges journalists' statements as truth, is called into question. In Habermas' definition of communicative action, no speaker's utterances have a privileged status as truth and in modern society nothing is to be taken as an article of faith.

For Habermas, the validity of all communications propositions is open to question. The journalistic ideology of objectivity interferes with the public's perception of the news by defining it as something other than journalists' propositions about events.

Readers and journalists would be better served by understanding journalism as simply the most truthful, relevant and sincere propositions that journalists can form about a subject at a given time. Journalism's own newly acquired self-effacing practice should encourage readers to challenge journalists to defend the validity of their propositions. Cultivating such mutual expectations between the public and journalists requires journalistic institutions to invite readers to actively participate in news production.

Some community participation in local journalism has already begun. In many cities, small local, community and alternative newspapers are being published. Even major newspapers are showing more concern for public participation in media. The *Star-Tribune* in Minneapolis is creating a new team of journalists to go into local communities to help people raise and address community issues and then to report on them.

These practices and other innovations need to be expanded and carried out nation-wide. In doing so, perhaps journalism will turn individual participation in public policymaking into a modern social ritual.

Endnotes

1. Paul Lester (1991). *Photojournalism, An Ethical Approach* (Hillside, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates). Lester's excellent book on photojournalistic ethics documents a number of cases of photographers being fired for setups.

2. Tony Kelly (1991). "Manipulating Reality, Digital alteration of photos discussed at Poynter seminar," in *Editor and Publisher*, 124.23: pp. 16–17.

3. Ibid., p. 17

4. Dona Schwartz (1992). "To Tell the Truth: Codes of Objectivity in Photojournalism," *Communication* 13.2: 95–109.

5. Rudolf Carnap (1943). *Introduction to Semantics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), p. 9.

6. Paul Grice (1989). "Logic and Conversation," *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), p. 26.

7. Ibid., pp. 26–29.

8. Ibid., pp. 28–30.

9. Jurgen Habermas (1987). *Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society* (Boston: Beacon Press), p. 308.

10. Jurgen Habermas (1990). "Philosophy as Stand-In and Interpreter," *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press), pp. 3–4.

11. Ibid. Chapter titled" Discourse Ethics," p. 48.

12. For a discussion of the teleological function of communicative action see Habermas' discussion of Austin's illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, pp. 288–295. He argues that the use of language with an orientation to reaching understanding is the "original mode" of language use, upon which other forms of use are "parasitic." In this sense language is the *telos* or foundation of society, if, of course, we agree that a modern society should be founded in mutual understanding rather than coercion.